

# PRESS RELEASE

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### **CONYERS URGES SENATE TO PASS “MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. EQUAL PROTECTION OF VOTING RIGHTS ACT”**

In 2000, our nation was faced with an election contest that threatened our sense of democracy. American citizens were deprived of their most basic right, the right to vote, and as a result we suffered through two months of uncertainty and confusion. The Supreme Court, whose steps we are on today, compounded the problem with an unprecedented intervention that stopped the counting of legally cast votes of U.S. citizens.

And there was an outcry for election reform from the elderly who were ripped off by butterfly ballots, language minorities who were denied their legal right to translation services and African-Americans who were disenfranchised and intimidated.

Today, we are on the verge of passing this historical legislation, the “Martin Luther King, Jr. Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act.” But I am concerned that the debate has become sidetracked into matters of so-called election fraud.

Our nation did not wait two months to determine who was the next President because of fraud. In fact, the only allegation of fraud that was raised was when a Republican election administrator in Seminole County let Republican operatives correct mismarked absentee registration forms.

We all know the real problem was bad machines and faulty procedures. And we should fix the problem before the 2004 elections.

We also need to be careful. Well-intended measures to deter fraud could be used by less well-intentioned people to intimidate minority voters. “Let me see your I.D.” was an infamous request in South Africa and we should not make it the law of the land here. We did away with poll taxes, but we need to be vigilant that the less affluent who do not have drivers’ licenses or utility bills will not be denied the right to vote.

There may be amendments that take us even further down this road, by requiring social security numbers and INS information. There may be amendments that would water down the bill’s provisional balloting language and water down the bill’s requirement that every voter with a disability have the right to a private and independent vote. We need to resist those efforts.

Election reform is still the most important issue facing our nation. And we must do all that we can to pass legislation to address the serious problems plaguing our election system. The legislation before the Senate is poised to do so but we fear a slippery slope of bad amendments that would undermine our efforts.

This bill bears the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. We should honor his memory by passing legislation that guarantees the right to vote and have that vote counted for every eligible voter.